ONE-HUNDRED YEARS AT THE LOUISVILLE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY[1]

In April 1902, Mayor Charles F. Grainger and 10 citizen volunteers sat in the Mayor's office and set the course for a literate culture in Louisville. They decided the City would have a free public Library, owned and paid for by the people of Louisville, with a little help from Andrew Carnegie. The Library they created that day was not the first in the City but it was the one that counted, the one that would last.

The Louisville Free Public Library was the 13th in a succession of libraries established in Louisville. The first was the Louisville Library Co., which opened in 1816 and was modeled on the subscription library Benjamin Franklin established in Philadelphia. The Library operated for six years but ceased operation during the yellow fever epidemic of 1822.

> *Citizen recognition that Louisville needs a public library to provide books and information for self-improvement has existed since 1816*.

Each of the successive libraries was witness to citizen recognition that Louisville needed a Library to provide books and information for the self-improvement of its citizens. Lack of funding always caused their demise. In 1871, the Public Library of Kentucky was founded and took another approach to funding. It was to be free, with funds to be raised by means of five nationwide lotteries. These lotteries grossed $6,250,000; the Library's share was only $424,396.

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[1] Adapted from an article by William Garner *in The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, edited by John Kleber and published by the University Press of Kentucky.

Financial Problems

With lottery promoters skimming off most of the money, the Library's income was not enough to continue its operation. Five weeks after the last lottery, the Library began laying off its staff. Within three months, the Library of Kentucky was completely broke. Eventually, the assets and debts were taken over by a new library venture, the Polytechnic Society, located on Fourth between Walnut (now Muhammad Ali Blvd.) and Green (Liberty). The assets included not only books but also paintings, sculptures, and natural history specimens (later to become the Louisville Science Center). Its means of support were a small endowment and annual membership fees, but these were insufficient to maintain a vigorous enterprise. The society had its last meeting on January 9, 1913. The materials it held were given to the Louisville Free Public Library.

Andrew Carnegie "Comes" to Louisville

In 1902, Louisville decided to take advantage of Andrew Carnegie's offer to cities to pay for Library buildings if the cities would maintain them, their collections, and staff. The proposal was accepted by Carnegie. On July 24, 1908, the present Main Library building at Fourth and York Streets was opened to the public. Carnegie not only underwrote the cost of this building but of seven branches throughout the City.

The Library instituted an ambitious plan of services to both children and adults. Western (opened in 1908) and Eastern (opened in 1914) branch libraries were for the specific use of African American citizens. These libraries for African Americans were the first in the country.

The Library system maintained a steady growth through the first three decades of its existence. The 1937 flood was a disruption, damaging 25,000 books and the museum collections in the basement of the Main Library.

An Expansion of Services and Facilities

During the 1940s and 1950s the Library expanded services. National recognition was received for its circulation of audiovisual materials. The Neighborhood College Program provided undergraduate courses in selected branch libraries. When television sets were rare in Louisville's private homes, the Library placed them in branch library meeting rooms as an alternative to neighborhood bars. Two radio stations were begun as an outgrowth of the concept that public access to information should not be limited to books and periodicals. The studios were in the downtown Library building for 50 years, until they moved to new facilities in 2000.

The passage of the county occupational tax in 1965 led to the expansion of branch libraries into Jefferson County. By the early 1970s the Library system consisted of 31 branch libraries, two bookmobiles, and the Main Library which tripled its size by an addition that opened in 1969.

Hard Times Again

But, by the mid-1970s, the growth had outstripped the available funds. Half of the branch libraries were closed. Between 1985 and 1991 three attempts, by petition and referendum, to establish a Library tax were defeated.

Community Support and A Resurgence in Use

The Library system has benefited from the support of three citizen groups: the Friends of the Library, the Louisville Library Foundation and the Library Advisory Commission. Begun in 1977, the Friends of the Library has provided volunteers, donated funds generated through book sales, and sponsored family reading programs for infants and pre-schoolers. The Louisville Library Foundation, established in 1980, raised millions of dollars for a new book endowment and to fund Library technology. The Foundation raises funds for children's programs, staff scholarships and special events such as the Gutenberg Exhibition. The Library Advisory Commission advises on its operations. The Commission also supports special public programs through the use of a small endowment fund.

Recent years have seen a resurgence in use of the libraries, aided by growing support from public officials. All 16 branch libraries are now open every school night for the first time in 30 years. Sunday hours are available year-round at the Main Library and six branch libraries. Attendance at the libraries now exceeds the gate at all professional and collegiate sports in Louisville, including Churchill Downs, the university, and the Louisville baseball club. The Library's use of Internet technology has been popular but the greatest increases have come in the special programs for children and books for reading at home. In 2001, the Louisville Free Public Library checked out more books than in any other year in its history.